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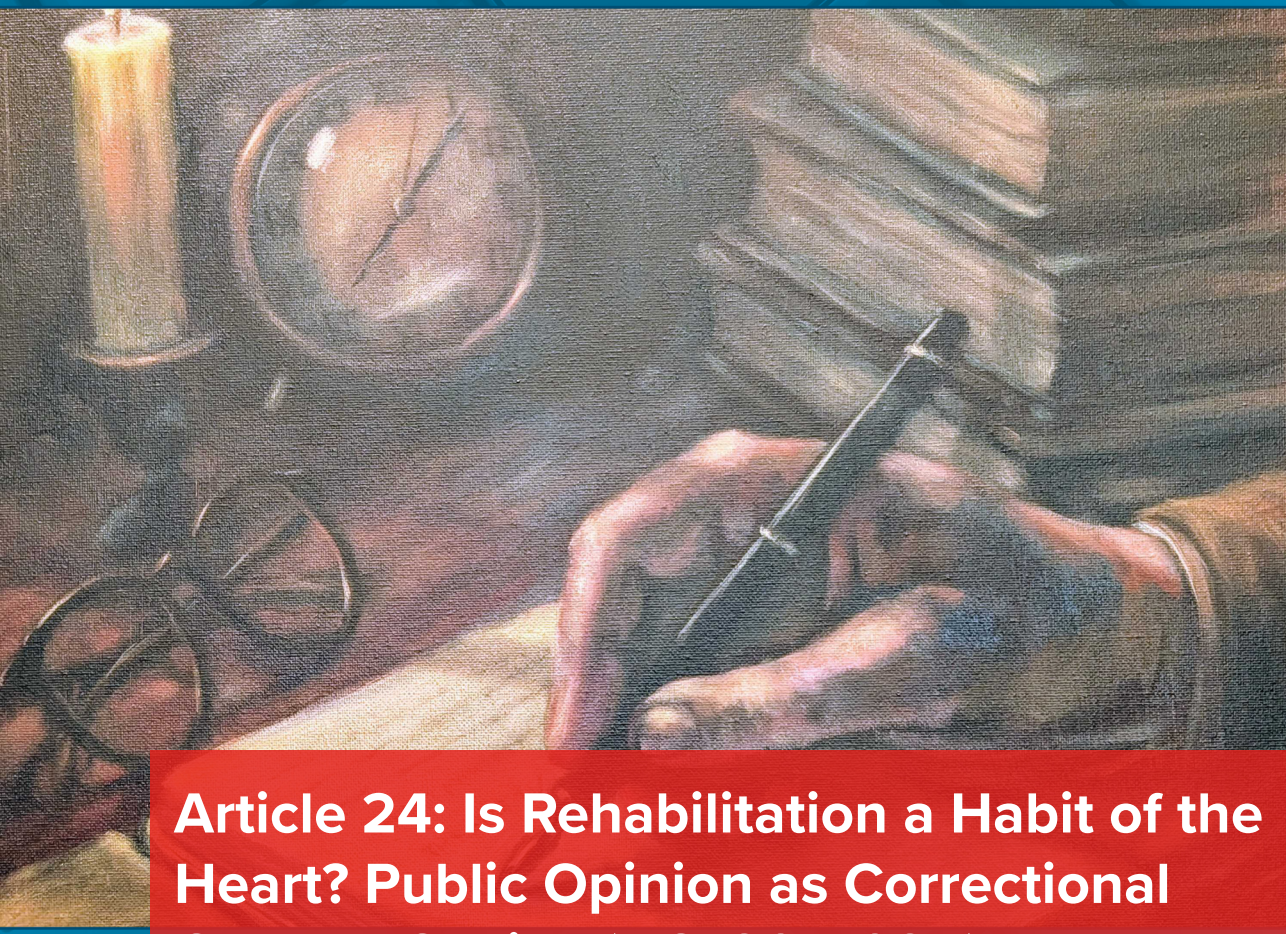

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IS REHABILITATION A HABIT OF THE HEART? PUBLIC OPINION AS CORRECTIONAL CULTURAL CAPITAL

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Abstract

Rehabilitation is an American habit of the heart—a core cultural orientation that has existed since the founding of the penitentiary in the 1820s. Using an autobiographical approach, we confirm this thesis by citing surveys we conducted from 1979 to the present. Although punitive, the public supports rehabilitation as an important goal of prisons, favors programming for criminals, and universally approves of treatment for juvenile offenders and early intervention for at-risk youths. They also endorse policies to include, rather than exclude, offenders from the community (e.g., rehabilitation ceremonies, expunging criminal records, reducing collateral consequences). This habit of the heart is a significant cultural resource for practitioners and policy reformers who can use public opinion to justify offender treatment as democracy at work.

Keywords: correctional policy, Cullen and Jonson, habit of the heart, public opinion, rehabilitation

This essay makes a simple but profound point: Americans support rehabilitation. They always have, and they always will. Tellingly, the inventors of incarceration in the 1820s called their new institutions "penitentiaries," not prisons (Rothman, 1971). In the face of social Darwinism and claims that a dangerous class of immigrants threatened the nation at the turn of the 20th century, Progressives designed a justice system that embraced the rehabilitative ideal, not incapacitation (Platt, 1969; Rothman, 1980). After World War II, optimism abounded as reformers labeled their work "corrections" and their facilities "correctional institutions" (Cullen & Gilbert, 1982). To be sure, rehabilitation was critiqued and often pushed aside as a penal harm movement subsequently gripped every state in the nation, yielding mass incarceration that flourished from 1975 to 2010 (Cullen, 2022; Petersilia & Cullen, 2015; Zimring & Hawkins, 1991). Still, though powerful, this punitive thinking and practice were not hegemonic (Listwan et al., 2008). Criminologists fought valiantly against them (Cullen, 2005). And let's not forget that Canadian psychologists—such as Don Andrews, James Bonta, and Paul Gendreau, to name but a few—documented that treatment worked and developed the RNR model that shaped correctional practice in the United States and beyond (Andrews et al., 1990; Bonta & Andrews, 2024; see also Cullen, 2013).

More than this, commentators mistakenly assumed that the growth of punitiveness in the United States meant that rehabilitation was "dead" (Allen, 1981; Cullen et al., 1988). It was not. For more than four decades, virtually every public opinion poll showed that Americans can walk and chew gum at the same time: They want to punish the wicked *and* to save the wayward. Even in the most punitive of times, Americans in poll after poll expressed support for treating offenders. This empirical reality leads us to conclude that *rehabilitation is a habit of the heart*.

First used by Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* (1835-1840/1969), this concept was popularized by Robert Bellah and colleagues (1985) in their classic sociological treatise carrying the title, *Habits of the Heart*. Both de Tocqueville and Bellah et al. were searching for answers to the same questions: "How ought we to live? How do we think about how to live? Who are we, as Americans?" (Bellah et al., 1985, p. vii). Their challenge was to capture the essence of the nation's character: What is it that makes us distinct? These core, immutable beliefs and orientations, which are expressed in opinion and behavior daily, are our "habits of the heart." De Tocqueville and Bellah et al. identified individualism as the dominant national habit. Rehabilitation is a habit of this sort as well because a large swath of Americans believes in "corrections"—that offenders are redeemable and thus that it is important for the state to provide treatment opportunities. Put succinctly: It is un-American to be against rehabilitation.

Because this issue has defined our careers (especially that of Cullen), we will tell the correctional habit-of-the-heart story through the conduit of autobiography. Cullen entered graduate school in 1972 and took his first job at Western Illinois University in 1976. By historical accident, his career intersected with the attack on the rehabilitative ideal, Martinson's (1974) nothing works claim, and prolonged mass incarceration (for a personal account, see Cullen, 2013). Jonson came to the University of Cincinnati to study with Cullen and received her doctoral degree in 2010. Since that time, they have collaborated extensively (having nearly 70 works in print), with Cullen now serving as Tonto to her Lone Ranger or as Robin to her Batwoman.

The autobiographical lens means that we will focus on our publications. However, the conclusions

we draw from our writings are supported by extensive reviews of extant public opinion studies (see Cullen et al., 2000; Jonson et al., 2025; Jonson et al., 2013; Siegal et al., 2016). A quick Google search will reveal contemporary studies, often using national samples, confirming our thesis (see, e.g., Blizzard, 2018; BSG, 2024). We will cite one example. A Marquette Law School Poll reported that 74.1% of Wisconsin voters stated that "rehabilitating offenders and helping them to become contributing members of society" was "very important" or "absolutely essential" (O'Hear & Wheelock, 2016, p. 48). The percentage was higher for Democrats (83%) but still high for Republicans (72%).

Finally, this essay is jointly written. For convenience and to retain an autobiographical focus, we use the first person when describing the contributions of Cullen. Our story starts with his early involvement in the issue of rehabilitation, which occurred many years before Jonson entered academia and their collaboration emerged.

Two Challenges

Early in my (Cullen's) career, remaining a treatment advocate faced two daunting claims: (1) Rehabilitation did not work, and (2) rehabilitation was anti-democratic because the public wanted to get tough with crime. As noted, the Canadians were instrumental in delegitimating Martinson's (1974) nothing works doctrine (see also Palmer, 1975). Gendreau and Ross's (1979) "bibliotherapy for cynics" article provided solid evidence that treatment programs were effective (see also Gendreau & Ross, 1987). A 1990 meta-analysis by Andrews et al. published in *Criminology*—of which I was a coauthor—further demonstrated that interventions worked that complied with principles of effective intervention (see also Bonta & Andrews, 2024). Google Scholar reports this article has been cited more than 4,100 times, making it one of the most cited publications in the history of the field. Mark Lipsey chipped in with his meta-analyses revealing the poverty of nothing works thinking (Lipsey & Cullen, 2007). Equally important, scholars held punitive programs and sanctions to the same empirical standard. Did they work? No, they did not. Whether it was boot camps, intensive supervision community probation, or scared straight programs, the results were dismal (Cullen & Jonson, 2017; Cullen et al., 1996). Jonson played an important role in discrediting the punishment response with her 2010 dissertation—a meta-analysis showing the null or criminogenic effects of custodial sanctions. Her writings with Daniel Nagin and me publicized and extended these findings (Cullen et al., 2011; Nagin et al., 2009). More recently, she joined with my research team to confirm these results with an updated meta-analysis (Petrich et al., 2021).

My (Cullen's) role was more prominent in addressing the second challenge: Using survey data to demonstrate that the American public endorsed rehabilitation. The first step was to admit the obvious: As my career unfolded in the last quarter of the 20th century, the public was becoming more punitive and policies reflected these sentiments (Cullen et al., 2000; Enns, 2016; Pickett, 2019). For example, Gallup historical data show that in 1966, more Americans opposed (45%) than favored (43%) the "death penalty for a person convicted of murder." By the mid-1970s, however, a sea change had occurred: Those favoring capital punishment had risen to 66%. This figure would reach 80% in 1994, before plummeting to 53% today (Brenan, 2023; "Death Penalty," 2025; Hannan et al., 2023). Similar trends pertain to the percentage of the public favoring harsher courts (Hannan et al., 2023). But again, advocating that criminals be punished did not blind people to the wisdom of rehabilitating offenders following their conviction. This sentiment was the habit of the heart—an ingrained cultural belief

in reforming offenders that could withstand even a five-decade get-tough movement. My job was to produce evidence that this was the case.

I started this mission in 1979. While at Columbia University, I wrote a theoretical dissertation under Richard Cloward. The good news was that I learned to think and this work was later published as a book (Cullen, 1984). The bad news was that my empirical skills were amateurish, as my early research showed. Self-financing a mail survey, I polled 200 residents of nearby Springfield, Illinois. Only 74 responded, making a definitive study impossible. I doubt any reputable journals would have been anxious to publish the survey's findings, but I had a good place to report them: my book, *Reaffirming Rehabilitation* (Cullen & Gilbert, 1982, Table 7.1). The results were instructive. Almost 9 in 10 respondents agreed that "criminals deserve to be punished because they have harmed society" (p. 259). Americans were punitive. But 9 in 10 also believed "that criminals should be given the chance to be rehabilitated," and 3 in 4 stated that "rehabilitating a criminal is just as important as making a criminal pay for his or her crime" (p. 259). These findings were not a methodological artifact of a small convenience sample. They captured an empirical reality that would be repeated in future surveys, including those today.

My next enterprise, with Greg Clark and John Wozniak, was to analyze high-quality data—the "Texas Poll" that surveyed samples of 1,000 to 2,000 multiple times between 1977 and 1982 (Cullen et al., 1985). I would engage in a similar study, with the same results, many years later, entitled "Rehabilitation in a Red State" (see Thielo et al., 2016). In the late 1970s, more than 80% of Texans favored capital punishment and about three fourths felt the courts were "too easy." Not too surprising. But rehabilitation was also a habit of their heart. About 8 in 10 stated that rehabilitation was a "very important" function of prison and of community corrections. The surveys also asked about specific programs—employment assistance, education, vocational, and counseling and psychological counseling. Nearly 9 in 10 Texans believed that these interventions were "very important" or "important" (Cullen et al., 1985, p. 20, Tables 3 and 4).

In my final year in Macomb at Western Illinois University—the Spring of 1982—I undertook another self-financed study, this one up the road in Galesburg. Recall that Illinois was a Republican state at this time (Jim Thompson was governor), and the rural counties in west central Illinois were not liberal oases (as was Boston, my hometown). Was rehabilitation a habit of the heart even in the midst of cornfields? It was. For this project, I had the good sense to read Don Dillman's (1978) classic book on surveys and to follow his "total design method" (as I would do on subsequent surveys). The response rate was 73% (n = 156). The results did not change. Punitive sentiments were revealed in responses to 13 "punishment items," but support for offender treatment was manifested in responses to 19 "rehabilitation items." The respondents rejected the idea rehabilitation "does not work" and had allowed criminals "who deserved to be punished to get off easily." Eight in 10 stated that prisoners should be given a "chance to be rehabilitated" (Cullen et al., 1988, pp. 307–308, Table 1).

When I moved to the University of Cincinnati, I also moved my research site from rural Illinois to urban Ohio. With graduate students who would become major scholars and academic administrators, I conducted three such surveys: (1) a 1986 survey of Hamilton County (Cincinnati) and Franklin County (Columbus) (Cullen et al., 1990); (2) a 1995 replication of the Hamilton County study (Sundt et al., 1998; and (2) a 1996 survey of Ohio (Applegate et al., 1997). Support for rehabilitation was very high in the

1986 study in both Cincinnati and Columbus, but a decade later had fallen noticeably when Cincinnati area residents were surveyed. Support for treatment was still manifest (e.g., a majority favored expanding prison programs and thought that rehabilitation was "helpful" for nonviolent and juvenile offenders) (Sundt et al., 1998, p. 437, Table 4), but the downward trend troubled me. Were these results outliers or a harbinger of things to come? Perhaps they were due to the fact that Hamilton County was a Republican stronghold. But another possibility existed: Might the get-tough movement have finally taken its toll? Was support for rehabilitation weakening? No, it was not.

The 1996 state of Ohio survey allayed my concerns. Led by Brandon Applegate, this survey used three different types of questions to probe support for rehabilitation: (1) the public's preferred emphasis or goal of prisons; (2) 10 policy statements; and (3) support for treatment when judging a factorial vignette (Applegate et al., 1997). In each domain, support for rehabilitation was strong. Some examples: When asked what "should be the main emphasis in most prisons," rehabilitation (41.1%) was chosen ahead of "protect society" (31.9%) and "punish" (20.3%); 82% also rated rehabilitation as a "very important" or "important" goal of prisons. More than 8 in 10 respondents agreed that adult offenders in the correctional system should be rehabilitated. And nearly 9 in 10 in the factorial survey stated that they supported "the use of rehabilitation with Gary/Lisa" (Applegate et al., 1997, pp. 245–248, Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4).

My run of studies concluded with a 2001 national poll (n = 349) (Cullen et al., 2002). The verdict, so to speak, was clear: The American public strongly endorsed offender treatment. Once again, the respondents believed that rehabilitation (55%), not protect society (25%) or punishment (14%), should be the "main emphasis" of prison. And 87% stated that rehabilitation was "very important" or "important." Ten Likert-type items were rated. Support for treatment was high, with the public stating that it was a "good idea" to provide treatment for offenders who are in prison" (92%) and "who are supervised by the courts and live in the community" (88%) (Cullen et al., 2002, pp. 136–137, Tables 7.2 and 7.3).

One other feature about this national study merits notice: Support for juvenile rehabilitation and for early intervention for at-risk youngsters was virtually universal. Saving kids is indisputably a habit of the heart (see Cullen et al., 2007). Thus, when asked about the goals of juvenile prisons, 97% of the sample stated that rehabilitation was important. On what should be the main emphasis of prisons in a forced-choice question, 80% of the sample chose rehabilitation versus protect society (8%) and punishment (8%). Seven questions were asked about intervening with parents, with Head Start, and in schools. Nine in 10 Americans favored these programs (Cullen et al., 2002, pp. 138–139, Tables 7.4 and 7.5).

These results are not idiosyncratic. In studies that contain items comparing results by offenders' age, support for juvenile rehabilitation is always much higher than for adults (Applegate et al. 1997; Cullen et al., 1990). A number of my coauthored surveys, conducted in individual states over three decades, show pronounced advocacy for both the reform of young offenders and for early intervention to prevent crime (Applegate et al., 2009; Cullen et al., 1983; Cullen et al., 1998; Moon et al., 2000; Moon et al., 2003; Piquero et al., 2010). Let me share just three illuminating findings. First, in a 1998 Tennessee study, 1 in 10 respondents (11.8%) reported volunteering for a program for at-risk youths and one third (33.7%) would consider doing so. This same sample supported a range of intervention

programs (Moon et al., 2003). Second, in another Tennessee study in 1997, three fourths of the sample preferred to spend tax dollars on identifying at-risk youths and rehabilitating them versus one fourth on building more prisons (Cullen et al., 1998). Third, in a 2005 Pennsylvania survey, three fourths of the respondents answered "true," as opposed to "false," to these two statements: (1) "Juvenile offenders can benefit more from rehabilitative treatment than adult offenders" (77.2%); and (2) "Juvenile offenders are more likely to become adult criminals if they are sent to jail than if they get rehabilitation in juvenile facilities" (74.2%) (Piquero et al., 2010, p. 295, Table 1).

For the first three decades of my career, I probed public support for rehabilitation in the bleakest years of the get-tough mass incarceration movement. Even when punitive sentiments skyrocketed (Enns, 2016), my coauthored surveys repeatedly showed that Americans supported rehabilitation, especially for wayward children but for adults in prison as well. These findings persist today (see Siegel, 2016). In fact, my recent surveys, many with Cheryl Jonson, reveal the power of this habit of the heart to endorse a range of policy initiatives seeking to reform and extend human dignity to offenders. We consider this research next.

A New Sensibility

In 2009–2010, state and federal prisons populations—for the first time in nearly 40 years—stopped growing. The mass incarceration era was over, not just because the number of people behind bars shrunk but because public punitiveness declined precipitously and a "new sensibility" emerged favoring more progressive policies (Burton et al., 2025; Cullen, 2022; Cullen et al., 2023; Hannan et al., 2023; Jonson et al., 2025; Petersilia & Cullen, 2015; Pickett, 2019). These developments are all consistent with advancing the rehabilitative ideal.

Thanks to Angela Thielo (2017), my then-doctoral student who alerted me to the survey company YouGov, I abandoned Dillman's total design method. I did not miss stuffing envelopes and licking stamps, tasks essential to hard-copy mail surveys! It was a luxury to hire YouGov to field methodologically elite opt-in surveys designed by my research team (Graham et al., 2021). Notably, in a 2017 YouGov survey (n = 1,000), Thielo et al. (2019) confirmed findings from earlier studies (reviewed above). The stability in support for rehabilitation—regardless of time period, survey method, or quality of sample—was remarkable. Thus, two thirds of the respondents (65.8%) stated that rehabilitation should be the main emphasis of prisons or was the second most important goal (p. 9, Table 1) (see also Sundt et al., 2015). More striking, almost 9 in 10 respondents (88.7%) agreed that it was "a good idea to provide treatment" to offenders under community supervision. Furthermore, 72.4% agreed that "rehabilitation programs should be available even for offenders who have been involved in a lot of crime" (Thielo et al., 2019, p. 10, Table 2).

Using national YouGov samples (mostly), we also found widespread belief in the redeemability of offenders, including Black individuals convicted of crime and/or in prison (Burton, Cullen, et al., 2020; Butler et al., 2023). The data also revealed strong public support for justice policies aimed at including, rather than excluding, offenders from the community: rehabilitation ceremonies (Butler et al., 2020); reducing collateral consequences (Burton, Burton, et al., 2020); expunging criminal records (Burton et al., 2021); providing problem-solving courts for people with special needs (e.g., addiction, mental health) (Thielo et al., 2019); and giving those serving long sentences for serious crime, who manifest

reform, a "second look" in which judges can reduce time in prison (Hannan et al., 2023; Smith, Cullen, et al., 2025). Relatedly, Americans favor extending reproductive rights, including access to abortion, to women imprisoned in states that ban abortion (Smith, Graham, et al., 2025).

Conclusion: Rehabilitation as Correctional Cultural Capital

We live in an age of public opinion polls (Igo, 2007). For practitioners and policymakers seeking to reform corrections and intervene more effectively with clientele, it helps to have the public on your side. In fact, they are. Although punitive to a degree and concerned about public safety, Americans are open to virtually any reasonable policy that offers offenders the chance to earn redemption. Rehabilitation is a habit of the heart that is universally available to be evoked. Phrased differently, it is correctional cultural capital that can be used to justify progressive policy and practices as democracy at work. The American public wants its justice system to be more than a machine that inflicts pain and suffering. As reformers have argued for 200 years, our task at hand is more ambitious; it always involves saving the wayward.

Appealing to the public will—to democracy—is both an honest and shrewd rationale for implementing correctional reform. In most instances, making a case for an initiative rests on a three-legged stool, two of which are showing that the initiative works (reduces offending) and is cost-effective. The third leg is that the intervention is supported by the public. Opponents of change are at a decided disadvantage when advocates can cite polls revealing strong public backing. This essay's value is in alerting its audience to the enduring progressive orientation of Americans—something unlikely to change in the future (Lee et al. 2022). Just remember: Rehabilitation is a habit of the heart.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors confirm that they have no conflict of interest to declare.

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